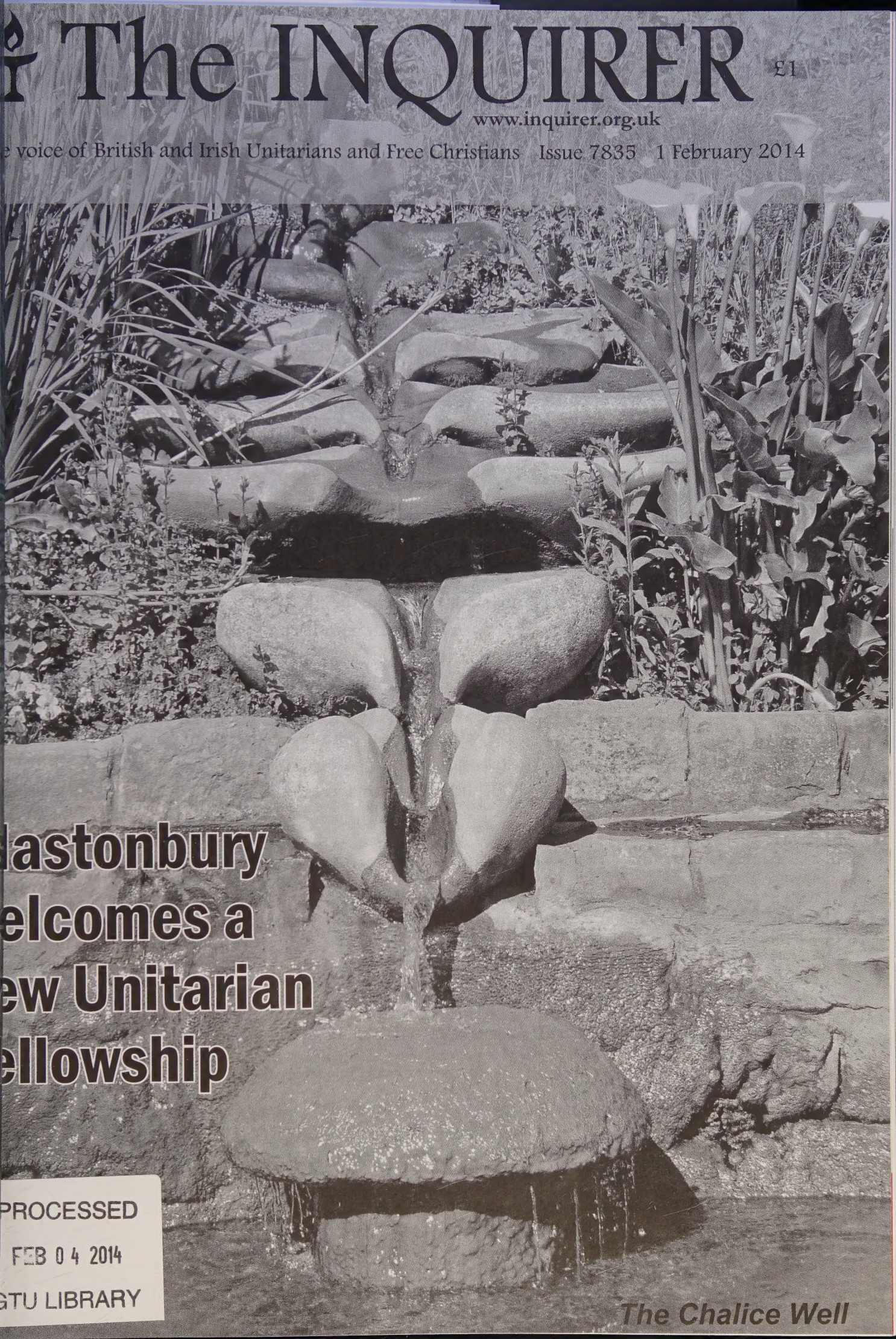


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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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The Inquirer is the oldest
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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
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Egyptian women photo by Sabine Janssens

Inquiring Words

BE AS FRIENDS

*"Believers, whether men or women, must
act as friends to one another..." – Qur'an 9:71*

O God,
who is the fount of mercy and compassion,
the will for justice and liberty,
be with your daughters as they tear off the
veils of oppression and separation, cast
aside the false dogmas that are used to
deny their full humanity.

Be with your sons and teach them
that the way of violence and terror is
not the right path and leads only to
hell, whose mouthpieces its preachers
are.

Help all people of the book, all believers,
all people with love and goodness in their
hearts, to embrace as friends, for humanity
is One, as you are One. Amen.

– Cliff Reed

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faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

New fellowship at Glastonbury

By Lorna Hill

"If ever there was a place for a Unitarian fellowship, it was here," commented Yvonne Aburrow after taking what is believed to be the first Unitarian service in Glastonbury. "It has such rich Christian and Pagan traditions, it is an obvious place for us to try and have a presence." She continued.

The service attracted 30 visitors, including a good mix of supportive Unitarians from nearby congregations and local residents interested to see what the Unitarians had to offer. The new fellowship is called the 'Unitarian Universalists of Avalon' because there are many people in the area who follow Universalist principles. Avalon – along with its mythical meaning – is a local name for the area covering Glastonbury, Street and Wells.

The fellowship is being organised by local Unitarians Toran Shaw and RouX Renard and is supported by the Executive Committee representative for the Western Union, James Barry. James said "I remember Toran calling Essex Hall saying he wanted to start a fellowship. That was about three years ago now. And it's great to see it happen. He and RouX make a great team. We would like to thank both the Western Union and the Cirencester Trust for helping financially, and Essex Hall staff for printing posters and orders of service."

The fellowship plans a service every 3 months and more informal meetings the other months. Currently they are meeting in a working men's club, but other more spiritual locations are being considered.

The next meeting is planned for 6pm on Saturday, 22 March and will be led by John Pickering and Katie Hall who,



(l-r) RouX Renard, Yvonne Aburrow and Toran Shaw celebrate the first Unitarian service in recent memory held in the Glastonbury area. Photo submitted by Lorna Hill

while they live near Kendal in the Lake District, are known in Glastonbury as they have spoken in the town before. "We are currently experimenting with Saturday evening events and will keep the idea under review," explained RouX.

There are two films of the first event, reflections on the event at http://youtu.be/Z8_xGXEzoy0 and one of the readings is at <http://youtu.be/vFBIqNdVQ28>

For more information about Avalon Unitarians see the website: www.uuavalon.org

Lorna Hill is a member of Ditchling Unitarians.

What better beginning than as the light emerges

(Excerpt from the address given by Yvonne Aburrow to celebrate the first service of the Unitarian Universalists of Avalon)

In the Pagan tradition, nearly every festival is the beginning of a new phase. Samhain is held to be the Celtic New Year, Yule is the rebirth of the light, Imbolc is the beginning of Spring, Midsummer is the start of the dark half of the year, Beltane is the start of Summer, Lammas is the start of the harvest.

But Yule is a symbol of birth and rebirth. The Child of Light is born anew each year. Krishna was born at midwinter, so was Mithras, so was Christ. Each of these deities is a symbol of the light within the soul, the divine spark within every human being, indeed within all Nature.

Pagans see winter as a time of introspection, a time to look within the self and retrieve the lost things from the depths, to reconnect with the creative spark within us.

So what better time to begin a new community, at this time of year when the light emerges once more from the darkness of winter?

Today marks a very special birth - the birth of a new Unitarian Universalist fellowship in Glastonbury. We will, of course, as is only right and proper, be wetting the baby's head in the pub later. It is also customary to offer blessings to such a new beginning. So I wish the new fellowship wisdom, joy, friendship, imagination, happiness, peace, and longevity.

Unitarianism is a unique tradition, having emerged from both the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the mysticism

of the Anabaptist tradition. It celebrates the freedom of the individual, and provides a community of support to help individuals on their unique spiritual journey.

Lucy Harris, a mystically-inclined Unitarian, wrote:

"Unitarians speak of the oneness of the divine principle running through life, and the central, fundamental call to love. We recognise the quest to find the truth of ourselves, and the challenge to believe and live up to what we are capable of believing, rather than what someone else says we ought to believe."

Contemporary Unitarianism welcomes insights and ideas from humanism, atheism, Paganism, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Quakers, Sufism, poetry, science - indeed any source of inspiration and wisdom. But it sifts and examines them in the light of its own experience and its call to freedom of conscience. The Unitarian watchwords are "freedom, reason, and tolerance" and the Unitarian toast is "To Civil & Religious Liberty the World Over!" (I'll drink to that.)

Yvonne Aburrow is a member of Oxford Unitarians.



Why we are still Unitarians

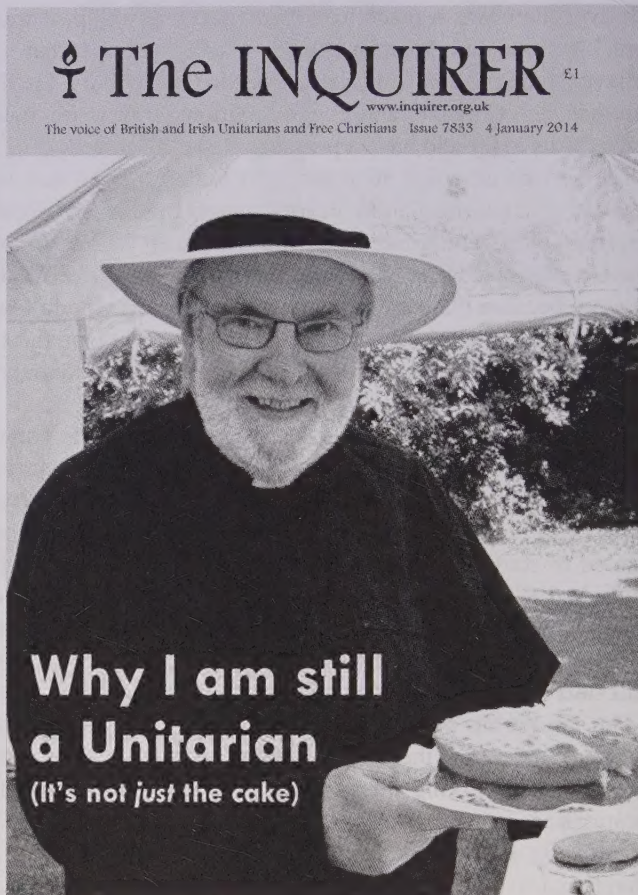
By David Usher

I am grateful to Bill Darlison for his excellent article (4 January) on why he is still a Unitarian. First, let me say how delighted I am that he continues to throw in his lot with us. How impoverished we all would be without his wisdom, wit and charm. I agree with many of his critical observations about us. As a bunch we do tend to be too cerebral, too homogenous in our middle-class respectability, too timid in our commitments. I am frequently impatient with our collective shortcomings. But I disagree with Bill in one important respect.

Bill opens his article by observing that there are no Unitarians when the plane is going down, then recounts his experience of serious illness 10 years ago when the theological sophistication of his Unitarianism failed him and he reverted to the comforting mantras he had learned in his Catholic childhood. Bill concludes that Unitarianism is a fair-weather religion, better suited to times of good fortune than to times of crisis.

This past year I have had my own times when my plane seemed to be going down. Like Bill, I found myself reverting to the rather simple faith learned in my childhood, but in my case that faith was Unitarian. In my childhood and adolescence I attended Unitarian Sunday School and then church virtually every Sunday. There I was told that life is a precious and miraculous gift, to be savoured with reverence and gratitude. I was told that my small and fleeting life is somehow mysteriously held in a greater and lasting largeness. There I was in the company of adults whose lives, much more than their words, were inspirations and confirmations of what it might mean for me to be in this world. During this past year, as I contemplated the possibility that my life might end sooner than I had supposed, that Unitarian faith of my childhood remained for me an absolute bedrock of reassurance and calm. I could not be more grateful for the Unitarian grounding I was given in what it means to be a person of faith.

Like any faith, Unitarianism is only as meaningful in our lives as we allow it to be. If we regard it as 'religion light' on



the margins of our lives, to be dabbled in only when it suits us, then so it will be. But we should not be surprised if it fails us in our times of crisis because we will have failed it in our times of plenty. The fault will have been in ourselves, not in the best principles of Unitarianism.

The Rev Dr David Usher is District Minister to Unitarians in London and the South East.

Daring to say Dawkins might be right

By Peter Godfrey

It is very good for Bill Darlison to get us thinking, and a great relief that he is still a Unitarian (*The Inquirer* 4 January). However I am surprised he says 'Who dares to challenge the magisterial pronouncements of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens?' There would be nothing daring if Unitarians did that. Everyone is challenging Dawkins. There were comments against him in both my Saturday and Sunday papers on 5 and 6 January.

What Bill should be asking is why we are not daring enough to say that there is a great deal of truth in what Dawkins is saying and that books such as his 'Unweaving the Rainbow' and 'The Greatest Show on Earth' are very good.

I am sorry to read Bill using the word 'scientism'. Nowadays this word is usually used by anti-scientists such as creationists who deny the fact of evolution. I hope Bill does not include evolution in what he calls 'the superstitions of science'.

Bill argues, rightly, for 'real proof', for 'validity' and for

'evidence'. Does he not realise that he is arguing for the scientific approach? What scientists, including Dawkins, are doing is asking time and again – 'Where is your evidence?'

Bill's quotation from Thomas Huxley is excellent: 'Be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads'. This is exactly what science is doing.

'Our excessive rationalism', says Bill, 'has left us with a soulless universe of purely material entities, with little room for God, and no room for miracles, or for life after death'. I remain a Unitarian because it dares me to ask 'Where is the evidence for these things? It encourages me to face the truth as I find it, it stresses the wonder in this life and it encourages compassion. It also enables me to see the wonder in matter. It used to be said 'Your God is too small'. I think the mistake nowadays is not to see the 'miracle' that science is showing matter to be.

Peter Godfrey is a retired Unitarian minister who lives in Stonehouse, Glos.

Readers respond to address

Bill Darlison's assessment of our Unitarian faith, recently published in 'The Inquirer', elicited many thoughtful responses. Several are printed here. The conversation continues. More will be published in coming issues.

By Anne-Marie Skilling

I read with interest the Rev Bill Darlison's article 'Why I am still a Unitarian' in the 4 January issue of *The Inquirer*. He asks the question "Where are the black Unitarians?" I am a black woman and the Unitarian Church here in Portsmouth has raised my spirits. For two-and-a-half years



Anne-Marie Skilling signs the membership book to join John Pounds Unitarian Church at Portsmouth. Photo submitted by Anne-Marie Skilling

I was in a dark place. I had lost all my confidence and self-esteem. I came across the Portsmouth Unitarian Church (John Pounds) last year. After a number of visits to this church I decided to become a full member.

Unitarians at this Church are loving and welcoming people and as the saying goes "Every Creed and Race finds an Equal Place". I believe wholeheartedly in this Church and I know it will continue to serve me well. So I say if you all want to be part of this family, join in and give thanks and praise. We are all unique in our own way and we are all learning to live as Unitarians. Shine on! Shine on John Pounds Unitarians!

Anne-Marie Skilling is a member of John Pounds Unitarian Church, Portsmouth.

Am I the only one who is unhappy?

By Phil Silk

I wish to join the 'conversation' based on Bill Darlison's SUA speech, as presented in the 4 January issue of *The Inquirer*.

First, let me say I know, like and respect Bill and am very pleased he is well enough to be our president. He demonstrates much of our Unitarian path by openly sharing his values and concerns.

Second, I agree when he says 'There is something about that spiritually dangerous mix of agnosticism, indecision, talkativeness and eccentricity which is wonderfully appealing'. (Yet not whole picture). Furthermore, I like the Rilke phrase 'heart-work'. Moreover, I also agree, partly, when he says, 'If we are to survive, we must develop a comprehensive religious system which is intellectually stimulating enough to satisfy the mind in its healthful moments of quiet reflection, but which also has the emotional power to help us through those inevitable periods when our lives are beset by turbulence.'

However, I take issue with some assertions. I'll mention a few.

- Where is his proof that the long-term decline in Unitarian numbers is the result (Only? Mainly? At all?) of our over-reliance on the mind? Can you have ideas and no feelings? Can we easily explain why our associates do not reflect the whole population? Has our historic (and current) social vision been restricted? Are we just a debating society? Or a mystical in-group? Or? Yet Americans especially are castigated for too much focus on public reform and service?

- Am I the only one who feels hurt by his characterisation of our worship services?
- I strongly disagree that 'there are no Unitarians when the plane's going down'. That is unfair not only to Unitarians but to all non-theists – a large part of the western population. Honest sharing of feelings – and ideas – can comfort and support those in grief and other troubles. I reject the idea that we are 'religion lite'. I do not limit the word to traditional views. Bill wants change, well perhaps he should credit naturalists with insight and compassion and wonder, with the capacity for spiritual growth, even if not seeking an afterlife.
- I am unhappy with Bill's denigration of science and of political liberalism. No one faith suits all. It is up to each person to make sense out of life as best we can; better still within a community of seekers and sharers. Perhaps many of us have censored ourselves, but no one has limited our search. Part of the challenge is to encounter different experiences, interpretations, suggestions.
- Let's hear more of what moves us, what helps, what hinders, with as much freedom and compassion as we can muster.

The Rev Phil Silk is a retired Unitarian minister who lives in Cheadle.

Emerson's wider vision created

This is part two of the recent William Ellery Channing lecture, delivered by **Patrick T O'Neill**

Ralph Waldo Emerson was still a student at Harvard College in 1819 when William Ellery Channing delivered the Baltimore Sermon that, as David Usher summarised expressed the Unity of God, a rejection of the notion of the Trinity as taught in traditional Christianity; The human nature of Jesus; the claim for a God of Love and Mercy over the Calvinist God of Vengeance and hellfire; the outright rejection of the doctrine of Pre-Destination; and the rejection of formal Creeds.

In fact, Channing was Emerson's own minister, since he and his mother attended Federal Street Church.

Emerson graduated from Harvard College in 1821 and from the Divinity School in 1826. He was called to the pulpit of Second Church of Boston in 1829, where he served for two years. From 1832 to 1838, Emerson was a supply preacher at Massachusetts Unitarian churches, and gave lectures and wrote essays which were widely published and praised.

His lecturing career blossoming, Emerson was torn over his decision to move away from the ministry. His father, grandfather, and his wife's father were ministers and Emerson seemed to have a love/hate affair with the profession. One friend said Emerson loved the *idea* of ministry, while he hated to practice it.

Emerson loved and hated ministry

The pastoral demands of ministry, and the expectations of parish calling drove him out. He became restive and critical even before he resigned from Second Church. He felt inauthentic and hypocritical distributing communion, knowing its symbolism meant more to his people than to himself. It was easier to blame the profession and church shortcomings than it was to accept his unhappiness.

What Emerson loved was preaching, and he was a harsh critic of less talented colleagues. He wrote, '...the next best thing to good preaching is *bad* preaching. I have even more thoughts enduring it than at other times.' Returning from one pulpit performance at Concord, he wrote the now-famous line, 'I like the silent church before the service begins more than I like any preaching.'

Emerson's moment arrived as he rose to deliver the Divinity School Address of 1838 – one of the most important sermons in American Unitarianism.

He spoke at the Divinity Hall chapel at Harvard College. It seated just over 60, and was filled for the commencement ceremony for Harvard Divinity School. Besides the six graduating ministers, a virtual Who's Who of American Unitarianism was present.

The American Unitarian Association was only 13 years old with fewer than 200 ministers, virtually all within a day's horse ride from Harvard Divinity School. So, six young men entering their ministerial careers was an important event.

Ministry students wanted a radical

The Divinity Class of 1838 asked Emerson to deliver the Address. He was the kind of speaker any graduating class loves – widely known as a brilliant and mesmerising orator, colourful in language, gifted in the use of imagery and metaphor.

But Emerson was also known to be a theological radical. They expected something provocative and stirring. Yet, few could have guessed that Emerson's words would drive a wedge into the Unitarian movement and change the course of Unitarianism.

Up to this point the American Unitarian movement stayed within

the confines of traditional Christianity. By 1838, a younger, more theologically adventurous generation was ready to challenge the New Testament miracle stories as unprovable and unnecessary interpretations of Jesus' life. They did not accept Jesus as divine, but as a prophet of the divine, a model of moral perfection – perhaps the greatest model of selfless love in history – but no more than a model. And they claimed God's revelation of moral principle went be-

yond the Bible. It continued in the life of every creature, in every person, in the sentiments and conscience of every human soul.

If these do not sound radical, be assured they were in 1838. Emerson hammered home every one of these points. Most of the students were enthralled, and the faculty and parish ministers understood that Emerson was giving voice to a powerful doctrine that would take American Unitarianism beyond liberal Christianity.

Controversy erupted within a year

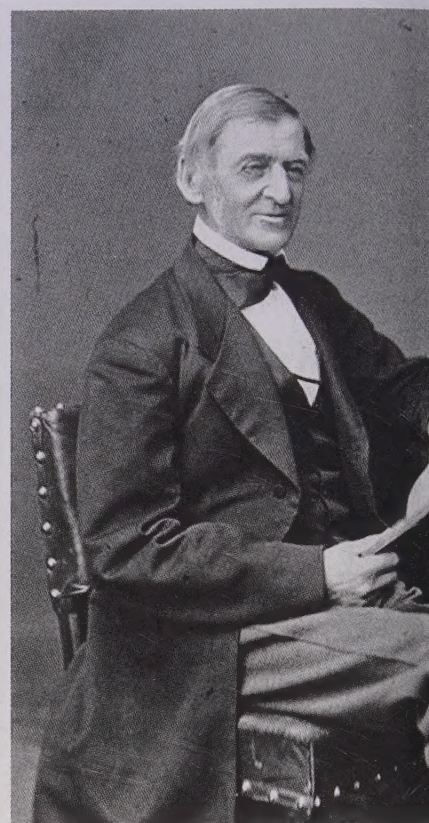
Unitarianism, as Emerson enunciated it, called for a religion and understanding with more than a Christian view. In the following years, a controversy broke between the Unitarians of Channing's generation and the New Age Unitarians who looked to Emerson and Parker as their poets and prophets.

The Transcendentalists found truth and wisdom in other traditions and claimed, for them, Unitarian reverence. For the first time, theology reached to embrace the concept of religious truth in many places, in many cultures, in many styles. This was nothing new, but a Re-Formation (and I intentionally emphasise the word *Re*).

American Unitarian theology began to expand from a narrow base to an eclectic and inclusive theology in scholarly Boston. It included the flowering of Biblical linguistic analysis of the day, and drew up to Eastern mystical traditions and languages, the poetry of the Upanishads, the meditation disciplines of Hinduism, the poetry of Qur'anic and Tibetan sacred texts for the first time in America.

It shocked orthodoxy. It still shocks some that we would look beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition and Scripture for inspiration and truth. Historically, Unitarianism did not see itself as rejecting the Christian tradition. It saw itself as a Trans-Christian tradition, in reverence for our Christian roots and reaching beyond to be enlightened by the truths of other great faiths.

The Address marked the end of Emerson's active involvement in the Unitarian movement, though his influence would be felt for decades.



Re-formation' of Unitarianism

Emerson himself once put it, 'The task of religion is to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.' My friends, let us be uncomfortable, if that is what it takes.

— Patrick O'Neill

Ralph Waldo Emerson
photo by Elliott & Fry
studio, London, via
Wikimedia Commons

Unitarianism's Re-Formation from its Christian roots. And whether this Re-Formative process destined British Unitarianism to remain permanently held back from flowering to its fullest potential, of a robust religious alternative to British culture.

Expect this notion will be resisted by those who cling to the view of Unitarianism being a liberal Christian sect, but it is valid to ask how Unitarianism can still claim that. Evidence supporting the claim seems woefully lacking in worship services which rarely invoke the name of Jesus, rarely refer to the Old or New Testament, rarely if ever have Communion services, have non-specific Blessing Ceremonies that may not use water in lieu of Baptisms and rarely refer to Original Sin or the necessity for salvation; congregations where doctrine and creeds are never appealed to nor applied where Passover Seders are at least as common as Easter celebrations where Winter Solstice is as likely observed as Christmas and where Buddha and Mohammed and Socrates and Newton are as revered as Jesus himself...

Philip Hewett, the British minister who became prominent in the 19th century, says just as Christianity was founded by ancient Jews in a Jewish culture and evolved away from its roots, so Unitarianism was founded by Christians in a Christian culture and eventually took its own path with the doctrines and worship practices of traditional Christianity and evolved away from its roots.

Unitarianism is unique among traditions

For those traditionalist Unitarians who insist that Unitarianism should still cling to its "merely Christian sect" identity, Hewett asks at what point was it no longer appropriate to consider Christianity as a Jewish sect? Likewise, at what point is it no longer appropriate to consider Unitarianism merely a Christian sect?

Unitarianism today is unique among religious institutions, both in the United States and in Great Britain: congregations where members' theological convictions range from those who proudly claim the label of Unitarian, to those who call themselves equally proud Atheists, with

tarian churches for decades.

Is it time for a modern British Unitarian Re-Formation?

The history of American Unitarianism illustrates how in its first two generations of organisation (roughly from 1820 to 1850) the movement (articulated by Channing) emerged as a new Christian sect; and how the Christian sect Re-Formed itself (encouraged by Emerson) evolving into a more eclectic religion, no longer limited to a Christian theology, but including elements from many different traditions and cultures.

Since the Transcendentalist Movement never had a lasting impact on British Unitarianism, one wonders what enabled the British

virtually every variation in between: proud Agnostics, proud Earth-based Religionists, proud New Agers, proud 'what-have-yous'.

The secret which enables these communities is the principle that is generally stated, 'We need not think alike to love alike.' When people join the Unitarian church they are not asked, 'What do you believe?' They are asked, 'What do you love?' And if what they love causes them to walk and to live in the ways of Freedom, Reason, Tolerance, and Love, they find a welcome and a congruity in the Unitarian community. They are not asked if they view Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour of Humankind. They are asked if they can celebrate in many different great religious traditions the echoes of radical love and justice, faith, hope, and charity as were once preached in the Sermon on the Mount, by prophets and teachers and heroes of faith down through the ages who like the Carpenter from Judea called all humankind to higher ground.

Jesus stands alongside prophets

Jesus takes his rightful place *among* other great spiritual mentors of history. He stands *alongside* the list of prophets, men and women, who taught the lessons of love and peace and graceful living to questing souls everywhere. For many Unitarians today Jesus remains the foremost of God's models for how a human being should live. For other Unitarians, Jesus is only one such teacher.

I think Unitarian congregations that have Re-Formed themselves beyond the merely Christian appeal of our origins are uniquely placed to offer a message of spiritual relevance in this generation of 'Spiritual but not Religious' preference. But as David Usher eloquently observed in last year's Channing Lecture, British Unitarianism may need first to give up some of its most cherished habits if it is serious about reaching our current-day culture.

Ironically, we Unitarians often give off an aura of being 'Religious but not Spiritual'! We meet in old buildings that look and feel Christian. Our worship rubrics are Christian. We sing hymns for their familiarity, often in words that, taken literally, ought to make us stutter in incredulity. We claim to be hip and up-to-date in our thinking. But what our outreach statistics should tell us is, 'if it looks like a traditional church, feels like a traditional church, sings and prays like a traditional church – it will come across as a traditional church.'

I don't know what British Unitarianism must do to turn itself around from its long, wilful slide to institutional obsolescence. This conversation has been going on for years. And I know the ire that pours forth whenever someone dares to name it, or when someone announces that this movement is overdue for Re-Formation, or for innovative initiatives to recast our vision. (See some of the angry letters that followed last year's Channing Lecture by David Usher.) I know people get defensive when someone suggests it's time for change. Maybe it will be seen as inappropriate or ungracious for this visiting American Unitarian to say so. But so be it. I speak as one who has lovingly devoted his life and his career to the preaching of Unitarianism and its values. But, as Emerson himself once put it, 'The task of religion is to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.' My friends, let us be uncomfortable, if that is what it takes. In the Book of Proverbs it is written, 'Where there is no vision the people perish.' But vision without action is just imagination. Please, let us commit to denomination-wide conversation about what our generation must now do to grow this faith of ours. There is much at stake.

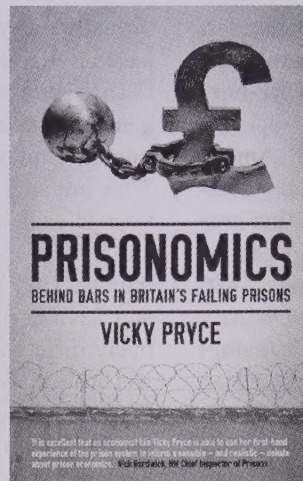
The Rev Dr Patrick T O'Neill is minister at Rosslyn Hill Church, Hampstead. This is the second part of the 2013 Channing Lecture he delivered at Golders Green Unitarian Church.

Book: Vicky Pryce and imprisonment

By Tony Cann

Vicky Pryce, the eminent economist, was committed to custody as a result of perjury committed when she took her husband's speeding points falsely maintaining she was driving their car when it was detected speeding. She shot herself in the foot when as an act of revenge for her husband's infidelity she broke the story to the press. Custody may seem a harsh punishment but committing perjury threatens our system of justice and if it is detected, no one, whoever they are, should get special treatment. However Vicky Price made good use of her time in custody in writing a recently published book 'Prisonomics'. Ms Pryce has managed to do something that those who pontificate from outside the system fail to do. Many people who understand the criminal justice system can articulate the injustice and inefficiency of committing so many women to custody particularly for non-violent offences. They can also detail the arguments for the differences that need to be taken into account when women, as opposed to men, are charged with criminal offences.

These differences include the responsibility women take for their children, the sense of separation and the effect of this on the children and their mothers, the part men play in domineering women and causing them to commit crime and the added



difficulties of finding jobs and accommodation and re-establishing themselves positively in the community on release.

Many rational people accept these arguments and want to see changes to the system. What Ms Pryce does is bring these arguments to life by her detailed and moving accounts of the difficulties faced by the women in custody with whom she came into contact. Also, as an economist, she emphasises and reinforces the ineffectiveness of imprisonment pointing the way to how it should be modified to better serve our society.

While our politicians do not see the issue as a vote winner or one worth risking the ire of the red top press, Ms Pryce makes the case and exposes the stupidities of imprisonment with the details

of the suffering of those with whom she was incarcerated.

Perjury is a serious crime. Ms Pryce with her sympathetic and detailed book full of humanity goes a long way to redeeming herself. Thank you, Ms Pryce. We all hope that you will have some influence to encourage changes in our inhumane and inefficient system of criminal justice and punishment.

Tony Cann is a member of the Unitarian General Assembly Penal Affairs Panel.

'Prisonomics', ASIN: B00GOH87BM, is published by Biteback Publishing at £16.99 and is available at www.amazon.co.uk

UWG 'blossomed' at Great Hucklow

By Juliet Edwards

I have been a member of the Unitarian Women's Group (UWG) since 1983. Our annual meeting has changed in nature considerably since we began by meeting in church halls and staying with friends who had available space. Women in the locality would provide soups, lasagne, cakes and fruit and often we would eat out on Saturday night. Several years ago we decided to take the strain out of our meetings and since then we have held them at Great Hucklow, easy for some to reach more difficult for others but welcoming for all and very beautiful this year in its golden autumn colours.

UWG has always been a mixture of serious discussion and cheerful ambiance and attendees are often refreshed, enlightened and enthused by participating in the week end. We always have our AGM which takes up two sessions, one when we gather on the Friday evening and one on Sunday morning for outstanding business. This is a good arrangement as it allows time for consideration rather than pressure of time.

This year the title was "Blossom – who do you think you are?" planned and led by Cathie Masztalerz. "Blossom" was a bit puzzling but was chosen because for Cathie it means something very beautiful as well as being used as a verb. Cathie used many ways for us to find out who we are –

- How do you learn information?
- What are your passions and what do you treasure?
- Which people have influenced you both positively and negatively?
- Look at your hand(s) and write about an event in your life as though your hand were the story teller.

These were all interesting ideas and were not threatening because all were given only a short time and, of course, one can always opt out. Some of the stories we shared were funny, some painful and many deeply moving.

There is immense talent in the UWG (as in many Unitarian gatherings) and when, in groups of five, we were given a bag of "clues" and 20 minutes to improvise a drama we set to with a will. This was Saturday night's entertainment and it was very amusing.

We ended each evening with an epilogue, on Friday led by Alison Patrick and on Saturday by Maria Curtis. On Saturday night, as we had an extra hour, we sang a selection of favourite hymns, using the purple book, accompanied on the piano by Sheila Jones.

On Sunday morning we attended the service at Old Chapel led by Liz Shaw, planned with the UWG in mind. We were even each given a pencil with smiley faces on it to encourage us on days when life is a challenge. Not everyone receives a tangible gift on attending the chapel!

We arranged to have an early lunch on Sunday because of the storm warning. In our final session there were memories we would take home and goodbyes and thanks to all those who had helped to make it such a valuable weekend.

This year we meet 24-26 October when the topic will be "Life through a Lens". If you would like further information about UWG, contact our membership secretary Dorothy Houghton at haughton@mallard99.demon.co.uk

Juliet Edwards is a member of Kensington Unitarians.

A few alternative thoughts . . .

When 26 December arrived I was reminded of the complaint about London buses. "You wait ages for one, and then two come at once!" So it was with Unitarian ministers appearing on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme. Having gone for years with, it seemed, no hope of ever having a Unitarian presenter of the *Thought for the Day*, we suddenly get two on the same programme, albeit one of them described as a Unitarian atheist offering an *Alternative Thought for the Day*. Some of us are content to be thought of as alternative, and for years we promoted our denomination as 'Outside the Mainstream'. Others dislike it, feeling it consigns us to the margins among groups or even cults that are not to be taken seriously. The 'powers that be' at the BBC may have had thoughts of this kind, hence their reluctance. If they allowed one non-theistic (the word I prefer) presenter, would they be under pressure to allow some less desirable non-theistic groups to have a look in? But allow us they did. It was the late Rev Arthur Long, I recall, who used to say, "Just because God isn't named or even mentioned, doesn't mean (s)he isn't there."

Many years ago I participated in a workshop on religious broadcasting held at Unitarian College. The speaker was, curiously, a Dominican monk with an interest in the subject. Having taken us through sessions on microphone skills and script preparation, he invited questions. A student asked, "How do we get in? How do we break into the world of broadcasting?"

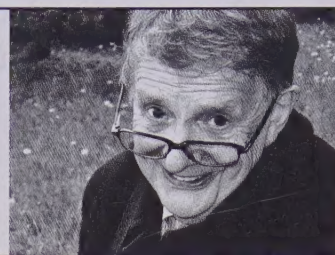
The monk gave a wry smile. "You offer to do a 'God-slot' on local radio at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning in August. The only people likely to be listening at that time are *you*, your mother and your auntie, if you tell them you're going to be on. But at least, it will give you a start!"

Not long after that I was invited to broadcast on local radio at 8 o'clock on a Sunday, albeit in the evening. I was doubtful about how many people were listening, which leads me to wonder how many people were awake on Boxing Day morning to listen first to the Rev Andy Pakula's 'alternative', and an hour later, the Rev Jim Corrigan's 'thought'. Perhaps it was a low estimate of the listener numbers that enabled the BBC finally to relent and let it happen. Things have moved on, however, and these days anyone who missed a broadcast can usually go on-line and catch up with it. (An archive of 'Thought for the Day' broadcasts is available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00szxv6/clips) Broadcasts are a little less ephemeral than they were and I have heard of one church that had a visitor who came directly as a result of the Boxing Day broadcasts.

In a previous column I mentioned one of our ministers who had actually met Nelson Mandela. Since then it has emerged that the aforementioned Jim Corrigan also met him (*Inquirer*, 18 January). The film *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, can be highly recommended. I loved and was moved by it. The lead actor, Idris Elba, looks nothing like the man he portrays but captures Mandela's voice and walk marvellously. I found myself simultaneously disappointed by Winnie Mandela's part in the story yet sympathetic to her appallingly cruel treatment and plight, excellently portrayed. It is an honest, thought-provoking and inspiring film, leaving me wanting to know more, and wishing I had done more during the anti-apartheid boycott of South African goods. Did my passing over of South African grapes, oranges and white wine in the supermarkets make any difference?

Funny Old World

By
John Midgley



A study day in December, *The Art of the Jazz Age*, was a marvellous excursion through the world of art deco. Tutor Adrian Sumner is a County Arts Development Officer, so I mentioned to him the windows (below) in our Pepper Hill Chapel, in Shelf, and later sent him a picture, though I always find stained glass windows difficult to photograph. The chapel has eight of these superb identical examples of art deco, all in full view from the interior though not from the exterior as they are protected by wire cages. They measure about seven feet high by three feet wide. Adrian's reply told me that he thought the windows "lovely and something of a rarity in church/chapel/ecclesiastical design even in those buildings which are in the art deco style themselves." I know nothing of the provenance of the windows, but they must have been costly in their day. The Pepper Hill folk are considering opening the chapel, as do many others, on the 20th anniversary Heritage Open Days this coming September, to show the world these hidden gems. Come see.



I have a longstanding interest in Unitarian stained glass windows and have a good look at them wherever I go. Some are fabulously valuable, and I'm developing a theory that there is a distinctive style of Unitarian stained glass, indicated by the topics they depict. The parable of The Sower features a lot, as does the Good Samaritan. I know of one that seems to illustrate 'The pen is mightier than the sword' (Edward Bulwer-Lytton) and another which has children gathered around Jesus includes a black child. Chesterfield's Anglican Cathedral, remarkably enough, has a window depicting a number of historic buildings in the city, including our nearby Unitarian Chapel. There is a marvellous book to be written about all of this, by someone with far more knowledge and expertise than I have. Also, a study day on art and atheism might be interesting. I wonder what atheists would put in their stained glass windows? There's another alternative thought for the day.

Letters to the Editor

Candidate seeks explanation from Executive Committee

To the Editor:

In the autumn I was pleased to be nominated by my two congregations, and another couple of bodies, to be considered by the Executive Committee of the GA as Vice President. I was shocked to learn that, despite my being the only candidate, I was rejected by the 7 committee members present (James Barry was absent and has been a great support to me since then). I have been very active in our movement since I was appointed to my first office at the age of 26. Since then, and I am now 61, I have held office or had some responsibility in our movement ever since. I became a Lay Pastor and then Minister and have ministered to our congregations for 34 years. My reward for such long service has been to be insulted by the Executive Committee. I have asked seven times to be told why I was rejected and have been refused. I have asked three times to be allowed to meet the Committee to discuss any allegations that may have been made about me. Again, I have been refused. All that I was offered was a meeting with two members of the EC, neither of whom would confirm that any discussion would include telling me why I was rejected.

I am bewildered. I can only think that false allegations have been made about me. I have picked up on some rumours that are nasty and unpleasant. How they arose I do not know but they are very wrong! For the Executive Committee to refuse to endorse my candidature without giving me a justifiable reason is a great insult to me. More than that, I feel destroyed. My good name is most precious to me and that has been taken from me without good cause. I have served the movement well and I was looking to my retirement as a time when I could have put even more energy in serving the General Assembly in some way. Now I have no heart for any Unitarian activities, except of course, my two lovely congregations who have given me excellent support. What I will not be giving up will be my demand to know why, after all I have done for the movement; I am still not being allowed to defend myself against false, and possibly libellous,

accusations. I want to know why I have been treated with such contempt.

I will *not* be giving up my right to vote in the next EC elections. My dream is that a stream of candidates will emerge and that the seven current members who have delivered this insult will be swept from office!

The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall

Stand Chapel & Unity Church, Bolton

A decision made and 'no dogs barked'

To the Editor:

It is now a month or two since it was announced that the nomination of the Rev Dr Vernon Marshall for Vice President and consequently for President had been rejected by the Executive Committee. Perhaps like many others, I had assumed that he acquiesced in this. Now I know that he did not. I hesitate to intensify his anguish by raising this matter but I do not think it should be left alone.

When we take on responsibility for governance we understand that we may have to be a party to some painful decisions and we generally undertake some unspoken vow of confidentiality to our comrades who will take them with us. Of course there are limits to this and we always have an option of resigning and stating our reasons. Sometimes we might even blow a whistle without resigning and face the wrath of our colleagues. No single individual has resigned over this decision so we have to assume that each one can reconcile it with their personal scale of values and with their sense of public responsibility.

There seems little point in challenging this particular decision because we do not know on what information it was based and I should fairly assume that the executive's data-base was better than mine, away up in Scotland. But there may be multiple unintended consequences.

It has been suggested to me that the reason for the rejection is that, with more than one parish to look after, no minister should be allowed to take on the extra duties. It has also been suggested to me that this particular minister is not "Christian" enough. More wildly, perhaps, it has also been suggested to me that the man does not dress as respectably as any

lower-middle management banker and so would give the organisation the wrong image, or even that the Reverend Doctor is about to be charged with some dire crime. Of course these suggestions may be ridiculous but they, and other more credible ones like them, can reverberate until someone tells us the real reasons and they can be very hurtful to the individual concerned.

The *truth* may be hard to find, or even, (remotely possibly) I daresay, better buried; but the *justice* must be addressed; and the *compassion* should be a responsibility of us all.

The justice might be addressed by restructuring the decision-making process, perhaps through hours of debate – although personally I would rather be rejected by some committee of my colleagues and others than by a vote of the whole General Assembly. The real concern is the compassion. This man was a sole nominee, so it is not even that someone else was preferred to him. Here is a man who has given his working life, and perhaps more, to this organisation which calls itself a church and professes to value truth, justice and compassion, allowed his name to be put forward for what many people would regard as an honour and has been publicly humiliated. Even the most well-balanced and self-confident of us would struggle with that and any self-doubts we may have would be raging within us.

No one can run an organisation on compassion alone but I think this episode should be the concern and the self-doubt of the whole General Assembly.

Iain Brown
Glasgow

Nightingale Centre brochure correction

To the Editor:

Please note that the date of the 2014 RE Summer School is 16th to 23rd August (not September as stated on page 10 of the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre's 2014 brochure). A corrected brochure is available electronically via the Nightingale Centre website – www.thenightingalecentre.org.uk – on the 'What's On' page.

Richard Merritt

Nightingale Centre brochure compiler

Years later, no sympathy for the Devils

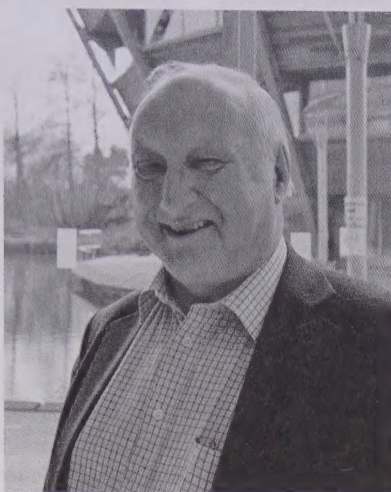
Unitarian historian and writer **Alan Ruston** looks back at 'Screwtape' and finds the devil irrelevant

CS Lewis was widely commemorated in the media before and after 22 November on the 50th anniversary of his death. The occasion was used to place a stone in his memory in what is known as Poets Corner in Westminster Abbey. At the dedication service the Dean of Westminster said 'he was one of the most significant Christian apologists of the 20th century and his stories inspired countless readers and film-goers.' He was thinking of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, etc. very well known to many.

The Belfast-born writer influenced me but not in the way he probably intended. He was an orthodox evangelical of a very idiosyncratic type, and it was one of his shorter works *The Screwtape Letters* that in my view expressed this position. I read it in 1959 when I was 18 and I found it arresting to say the least. I wrote about it in the *Inquirer* of 16 July 1988 in a series, 'Books which influenced Unitarians.' First published in 1942 I still have my paperback of 1955 (price 2/-) and it's very brown round the edges.

The book consists of letters addressed by a senior devil (Screwtape) to a junior devil, on the best way to tempt humans away from 'the Enemy' (in other words God); it's cleverly done and well written. In the week before 22 November BBC Radio 4 put on extracts which were read each morning by the actor Simon Russell Beale. Its oddity comes out from the start as the preface states, 'Readers are advised to remember that the devil is a liar. Not everything that Screwtape says should be assumed to be true, even from his own angle.'

Where does this leave the reader? In my case intensely irritated, and convinced that Lewis's Christian position expressed



Alan Ruston
Photo by John Hewerdine

here was nothing more than a lot of mumbo-jumbo. As I wrote in 1988, 'It became clear to me that if I was to follow any religion at all it must be one that attempts to base itself on reason and empiricism. Not long after this realisation I joined Newington Green Unitarian Church. I think it can be said that Lewis's words had the opposite effect on me from that which he intended, though who can say what this brilliant but odd man hoped readers would get from his works.'

Re-reading it in 1988 I found the book irritating and dated and wondered why it so influenced me in 1959. Perhaps this different reaction is because the impact books have on us depends on our emotions and needs when we read them. My conclusion in 1988 was that there are shafts of insight into human nature lost on me earlier, but on

re-reading it I now saw the book as irrelevant. I asked if this was my final evaluation and undertook to re-read it in twenty years in 2008 and share my thoughts with readers.

2008 has been and gone, but 25 years on I've re-read most of it and listened to the edited version on radio. My view is the same as in 1988 but now it's not a work I'd want to look at again. There are still valid insights within it but the whole is irrelevant to me expressing a view of life and religion that is not mine. I cannot see that CS Lewis is of the literary status generally to warrant a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey alongside the great figures of literature. If I'm still alive and sentient in 20 years time I'm not going to undertake now to look again at the *Screwtape Letters* (my copy must surely have disintegrated by then!). The 50th anniversary has prompted me to come to what should be my final evaluation. But who knows perhaps it's unwise to come to a finality, something may happen to make me change my mind and wish to consort again with these literary devils.

Alan Ruston is a member of the Watford Fellowship.

Minister Emeritus at Ipswich

At their AGM in November, the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting voted unanimously to ask the Rev Cliff Reed to accept the honorary title of Minister Emeritus. In his letter of acceptance, Cliff said how honoured he felt to have this title conferred on him.

He continued: "*The prime motivation of my thirty-six years of ministry at our Meeting House was to nurture a community, not just of personal religious liberty, but also one where the Spirit of loving kindness dwells, guides and prevails in all things. In conferring this title on me, you have extended to me that same love and kindness, and assured me that I am still a part of the beloved community which it was my pleasure and (mostly!) my joy to serve for so many years. And, as someone once wrote, 'Let brotherly [and sisterly] love continue.'* (Hebrews 13: 1)"

Cliff retired in October last year, since when he has been working on a new book of devotional material with the Tagore-inspired title, 'Caravan of Lamps'.

Unitarian Chapel in the Garden - Bridport DORSET
SEEKS Minister/Community Leader



Bridport Unitarians are a growing, vibrant and theologically diverse community. We seek an inspiring, dedicated and warm hearted community leader with strengths in facilitating worship, pastoral duties and fundraising. We are looking for an initial commitment of three years.

We are offering a post for a ¾ time position offering the equivalent ¾ GA pay scale, ¾ manse and relevant expenses.

To begin post by agreement - summer 2014.

www.ukunitarians.org.uk/bridport

email lphilips@unitarian.org.uk

Closing date: 28th February 2014.

News in brief

New 'Rites of Passage' course for lay people

The Unitarian General Assembly's Local Leadership Strategy Group is running a 'Rites of Passage' course at Stalybridge Unitarian Church, Forester Drive, Stalybridge, SK15 2HX on four Saturdays in Summer, 17 May, 7 and 28 June, and 19 July. The sessions will run from 10am to 4pm.



Dawn Buckle

The course is designed primarily to help congregations without full-time professional leadership to meet their rites of passage needs by training lay worship leaders to conduct rites of passage. On successful completion of a short verbal presentation on the last Saturday, participants will be awarded a Local Leadership Strategy 'Rites of Passage' foundation step certificate.

The Course Leader is Dawn Buckle (dawnbuckle@ymail.com). Tutors are the Rev Dr Vernon Marshall (Baptisms/Namings), the Rev Andrew Parker (Funerals), and the Rev David Shaw (Weddings/Civil partnerships).

The fee, including registration, is £40. Cheques payable to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches should be sent to Mary-Jean Hennis at Essex Hall 1-6 Essex St London WC2R 3HY from whom further information and applications forms are available. Please book before 10 May.

— Dawn Buckle



A Junior weekend sing-song.

Youth leaders are willing to hit the road

Do you have a group of children in your congregation/wider congregation that might like a visit from the Youth Roadshow? We have a small band of merry experienced/trained youth workers who could come and run a few hours of activities for your congregation – a taster of the national youth programme events we have been running primarily run at Great Hucklow for many years.

We have already done several around the country to great success. We bring everything with us, can entertain five to 25 children in one sitting, and it's all entirely FREE. Currently we target these sessions at 5-12 year olds, but may be able to provide sessions for older groups if required. For more information contact Sue Talbot at suetalbot@virginmedia.com or 07788 673949.

Haughland House Trust Sc036313

Is offering an Exciting, Challenging, life-changing opportunity the position of

Manager and Custodian of Haughland House, Shapinsay Orkney KW17 2DZ
Thriving Unitarian Retreat Centre
From October 2014

A Salary will be self generated by development projects in the pipeline. With the position is a roomy 2 bedroom Cottage available to buy. Would suit a newly retired Minister, or lay Pastor or lay person in charge with plenty of energy!

Shapinsay is a small island, population around 300, with regular ferry service of 25mins from the main town, Kirkwall. Amenities include a local Primary School, surgery, Community Centre, Heritage Centre, and Shop/petrol. Plus a Development Trust, and community associations. A close, friendly community.

Please contact Lesley Mckeown on 01856 711750 or Email lesleymckeown@hotmail.com for further details

Interviews will take place on Friday April 25 2014
Closing date

for Applications is Friday March 28 2014
www.orkneyretreat.org.uk

The Hibbert, Case & Gregson Trusts

are seeking long-term administrative/secretarial services from June 2014.

The services will include managing and servicing the meetings of the Trusts and responding to applications for grants and requests for information.

The work typically requires approximately 25 days spread over the year. Full expenses and an appropriate fee will be paid.

For further information, please contact the Chair of the Trusts by email:

Dorothy Hewerdine:
dot@hewerdinefamily.co.uk

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